



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 2 October 2024

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Stormont

Present:

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Colin Crawford MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via Video-Conferencing:

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Apologies:

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:01am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

Pádraig Delargy declared an interest as he is in receipt of a student loan and is currently undertaking a Skill-Up course on productivity.

Jonathan Buckley declared an interest as he is in receipt of a student loan.

Kate Nicholl declared an interest as she is in receipt of student loan.

David Honeyford declared an interest as he has a child in receipt of student loan.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson thanked Committee members for attending the informal meeting with Translink and Hospitality Ulster and the Belfast Night Czar on Tuesday 1 October 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Infrastructure and the Minister for the Economy indicating the Committee's support for an extension of the Nightmovers service on a pilot basis, with a view to promoting safe late-night travel, initially at Christmas and then all year in order to support the night time economy.

The Chairperson noted a reference in Assembly Written Answers to a review of FE student support.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the relevant report and clarity on the progression of the recommendations.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 25 September 2024, as amended.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Productivity in Northern Ireland – Oral and Written Evidence Session

The witness joined the meeting at 10:05am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Dr David Jordan, Queen's University of Belfast, Business School and the Productivity Institute.

Key issues discussed included: the need for NI-based multifactor productivity data, the value of productivity targets to evaluate policy interventions and the associated importance of adequately resourcing NISRA; factors affecting productivity including structure, peripherality, investment, human capital, skills deficits, management practices, infrastructure, policy; the impact of health and well-being policy measures such as the 4-day week and remote working; the use of east/west and north/south comparators in order to usefully inform productivity benchmarking; the variation of productivity levels across sub-regions of NI and the likelihood of distortion by star performers and the long tail of low productivity owing to satisficing; the role of FE and lifelong learning in enhancing productivity; and collaborations with Invest NI in order to inform policy interventions.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for his evidence.

The witness left the meeting at 10:56am.

7. Sub-Regional Economic Plan – oral and written evidence session

Officials joined the meeting at 10:56am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Ciaran McGarrity, Head of City and Growth Deals Programme, Department for the Economy;
- Keith Brown, Head of Place and Sub-Regional Economy, Department for the Economy;
- Kieran Donoghue, Chief Executive Officer, Invest NI; and
- Alan McKeown, Executive Director, Regional Business, Invest NI

Key issues discussed included: the impact of the change of policy on economic development in respect of the Belfast metropolitan area and the rest of NI; the co-designed development of a funding formula to support Local Economic Partnership (LEP) projects; the redeployment of DfE and Invest NI support staff in support of the move from a 4 to 5 centre Invest NI model; the treatment of Foreign Direct Investment opportunities on a case-by-case basis; and the 10 year Regional Property Programme.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:59am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on:

- the new Departmental role in respect of City of Derry Airport;
- the development of the funding formula for the LEPs and council projects; and
- the 10 year Regional Property Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the development of productivity data set and benchmarks to support the evaluation of economic interventions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Dr Jordan seeking research and data on the productivity impact of health and well-being measures including the 4-day week and remote working.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government seeking an update on the Towns Fund allocation to cities in Northern Ireland.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 12:03pm

8. Delegated Legislation - Student Fees

The Committee considered a proposed statutory rule which would alter The Education (Student Support) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 in line with anticipated changes to the tax rules for non-UK domiciled individuals.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the associated rule.

9. Delegated Legislation - Student Fees Inflation

The Committee considered a proposed statutory rule in respect of the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the associated rule.

Proceedings were suspended at 12:06pm

Proceedings resumed at 12:09pm

Jonathan Buckley re-joined the meeting at 12:09pm

10. Delegated Legislation - SR RHI Tariffs

The Committee considered a statutory rule laid by the Department in respect RHI tariffs and agreed the following motion:

Agreed: “That the Committee for the Economy has considered SR 2024/000 The Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024, and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, recommends that it be affirmed by the Assembly.”

11. Correspondence

11.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

11.2 Social Enterprise Action Plan

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response indicating that the Social Enterprise Action Plan is being developed by the Social Enterprise Co-Design Group with a view to publication in October 2024.

11.3 Apprenticeship Action Plan

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response indicating that the Apprenticeship Action Plan is in development with costs likely around £41m.

11.4 New Appointees to the NI Tourism Board

Noted: The Committee noted information on the new appointees to the NI Tourism Board.

11.5 Smaller (<5MW) Distributed Renewable Assets

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the use of smaller (<5MW) distributed renewable assets. The Department indicated that it is still considering the minimum size of renewables that will be included in the new support scheme.

Members recorded their concerns and reiterated the importance of the effective use of distributed renewable assets.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to Renewable NI, for its information.

11.6 Consultation on Low Carbon Heating in Residential Buildings

Noted: The Committee noted the Department's anticipated consultation on support for low carbon heating in residential buildings.

11.7 HE Quality Research Capital Allocations by University

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of Higher Education Quality Research capital allocations by university.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to UU and QUB seeking information on their HE Quality Research capital plans by campus.

11.8 Enhanced Investment Zone

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Enhanced Investment Zone.

11.9 Post-19 SEN Provision Transformation Proposal

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the post-19 SEN provision transformation proposal.

11.10 Sub-Regional Economic Plan

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence relating to the Minister's oral statement on the Sub-Regional Economic Plan.

11.11 Harland and Wolff

Noted: The Committee noted a response to Committee queries in respect of the future of Harland and Wolff.

11.12 Digital Skills Action Plan 2024-2034

The Committee considered a copy of the Digital Skills Action Plan 2024-2034 provided by the NI Skills Council.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Action Plan to the Committee for Education, for its information.

11.13 DARD Rural Childcare Programme

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Education on the previous DARD Rural Childcare Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to NICMA, for its information.

11.14 Insurance

The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance on insurance issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward previous related correspondence from the Financial Conduct Authority to the Competition and Markets Authority, for its information.

11.15 Labour Relations Agency Forum

The Committee considered a response from the Labour Relations Agency to Committee suggestions that Hospitality Ulster be added to the LRA Employers Forum.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Hospitality Ulster, for its information.

11.16 Financial Conduct Authority

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the FCA.

11.17 NUS-USI

The Committee considered an invitation from the president of the NUS-USI to meet with the Chairperson.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to meet informally with NUS-USI, subject to his availability.

11.18 Centre for Public Policy and Administration

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to the launch of the Centre for Public Policy and Administration (CPPA) at QUB on Friday, 25 October 2024.

11.19 WorkPlus

The Committee considered correspondence from WorkPlus in respect of issues relating to apprenticeships.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite WorkPlus to give a formal briefing to the Committee.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on access to student finance for Graduate Entry Medical School students and a briefing from officials from the Department and, as appropriate, from the Student Loans Company regarding interest rates and repayment option policy for students in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its Forward Work Programme, as amended

13. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

14. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 9 October 2024 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:20pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

2 October 2024